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**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEPTIONS OF INTERCULTURAL
LANGUAGE LEARNING AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: A CASE
STUDY**

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Abstract

It is widely advocated that English has been used as a communication tool to interact with people from different cultures. However, one must be interculturally competent apart from adequate proficiency in English in order effectively and appropriately communicate with others in multicultural situations. This case study endeavored to investigate EFL graduate students' perceptions of intercultural language learning (IcLL) and their level of intercultural competence (IC). It involved the employment of a questionnaire to collect data from seventy EFL graduate students studying at a university in Thailand. The results revealed that the participants perceived IcLL

positively and had high level of IC. Yet, English majors and non-English majors were found to be different in their perceptions of IcLL, and there were differences in level of IC in terms of major and English proficiency. In addition, it was found that EFL graduate students' perceptions of IcLL were positively correlated with their IC. These preliminary findings are hoped to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between students' perceptions of IcLL and their IC.

Keywords: graduate student; perception; intercultural language learning (ICLL); intercultural competence (IC)

1. Introduction

Within its new roles such as English as an international language, a lingua franca, a world language, and a global language in the process of globalization, English has been used as a communication tool for different purposes such as business, travel, politics, etc. in multicultural situations. Apart from that, English has become one of the most studied languages around the world, and there are more non-native speakers using English than native speakers. Accordingly, English as a foreign language has been widely adopted in many countries throughout the world as the main foreign language in their educational instructions. In such a situation, English language learners including both ESL and EFL learners need to learn beyond the culture of the target language. i.e. the learning of culture focuses on not only its target language culture but also other cultures around the world where English is commonly used as a communication tool, in order to become interculturally communicative competent.

From the reality of the importance of English, it cannot be denied that English has, on the one hand, been globally used in multicultural contexts since it functions as a bridge between peoples, countries, and cultures. English users need, on the other hand, to be equipped with preliminary knowledge of different cultures in order to avoid communication breakdown, cultural clashes as well as cultural shock. Accordingly, being interculturally competent is a must-to-possess for every ESL and EFL learner to effectively and appropriately function in multicultural situations. Therefore, this case study was conducted in order to gain an understanding of EFL graduate students' perceptions of intercultural language (IcLL) and their level of intercultural competence (IC) in the context of a university in Thailand. Three research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. What are EFL graduate students' perceptions of IcLL and their IC?
2. Are there any differences in EFL graduate students' perceptions of IcLL and their IC in terms of gender, major, and English proficiency? If yes, how?
3. What is the relationship between EFL graduate students' perceptions of IcLL and their IC?

2. Literature review

In the literature, the term of IC has been variously defined by many scholars (e.g., Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2001; Lustig & Koester, 2003; Sinicrope, Norris & Watanabe, 2007). Byram (1997) defines IC as the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with other people from different cultures, which includes five elements, namely attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness/political education. Likewise, according to Bennett and

Bennett (2004), IC is “the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts” (p. 149). They argue that the ability to communicate effectively stems from a combination of concepts, attitudes, and skills that can be learned and acquired through training and contact with others from different cultures. However, the quality and quantity of the acquisition and learning of other cultural concepts, attitudes, and skills depend on one’s experience and readiness. Sinicrope et.al., (2007), unlike previous scholars, argue that IC can be simply defined as the “ability to step beyond one’s own culture and function with other individuals from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds” (p. 1). This general definition focuses only on some vague ability and does not mention specific attitudes or knowledge as in many definitions of IC, but it seems to summarize what most definitions of IC have in common. In a nutshell, although IC can be differently defined, it can be commonly understood to have four key elements: attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness, which help one to effectively and appropriately communicate with other people from different cultures.

From different views on IC, it is seen that various models of IC have been proposed to address many aspects of IC, i.e., developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1986); model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Byram, 1997); IC model (Fantini, 2000); pyramid model of IC (Deardorff, 2006), etc.. One of the most famous and comprehensive models is Byram’s (1997) model of ICC which is used to develop and evaluate learners’ IC in different contexts. This ICC model (Figure 1) consists of three main features: the ideal of the intercultural speaker who is aware of cultural differences and similarities, can function as a mediator between distinct cultures and diverse sets of beliefs, values, and behaviors (Byram, 2008, p. 78), educational objectives for acquiring IC in an

education setting, and specific places of learning and roles of instructors and students. The top part of the model (Figure 1) illustrates how IC relates to other competences, namely linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence and discourse competence.

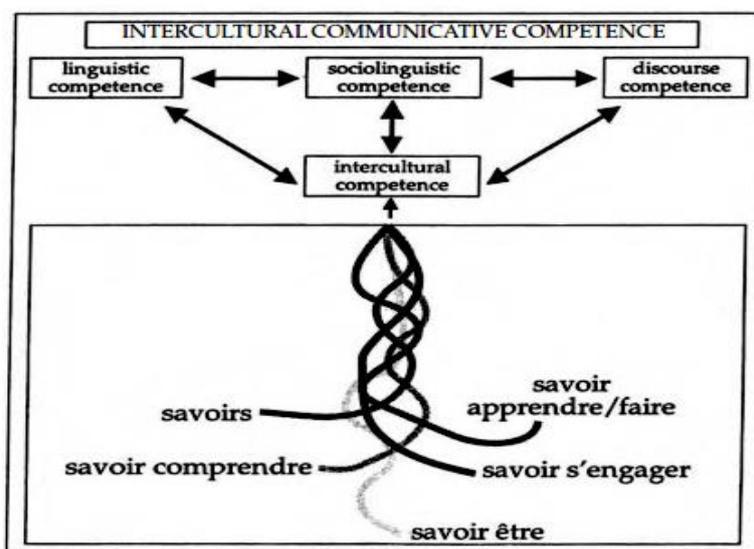


Figure 1 Model of ICC (Byram, 1997, p.73)

The lower part of the model includes five elements such as attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness/political education. Byram's (1997) supposes that the first four elements (attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, & skills of discovery and interaction) should support learners to enhance the fifth objective of IC, which is critical cultural awareness (Table 1). Based upon this model, Byram (1997) formulates specific educational objectives which are designed for language and culture learning and serve as guiding criteria to develop and assess learners' IC in the foreign language class. Those educational objectives are specific and detailed, but they do not specify the different levels of IC to be obtained at different stages through the process of education since he argues that establishing levels is quite problematic for the attitude factor.

Table 1 Byram: Intercultural competence

	Skills interpret and relate	
Knowledge of self and other; of interaction: individual and societal	Education political education critical cultural awareness	Attitudes relativising self valuing other
	Skills Discover and/or interact	

Different studies (e.g., Brighton, 2010; Nakano et al., 2011; Nichols, 2011; Shaftel et al., 2011; etc.) have been conducted in order to address the complexity of learners' IC such as relationship between students' overseas experience and their IC development, changes in students' IC promotion, students' IC development through interaction with people from different cultures, etc.. For example, Brighton (2010) investigated how students in Poland developed their ICC. His study involved using a questionnaire to collect data from 119 students, and the findings indicated that students who engaged in greater communication with foreign cultures, for example, access to a social network, especially with foreign contacts, created better IC, and those who did have much access to social network site, work and holidays abroad had challenges in developing their IC. In 2011, Nichols carried out a study on how students promoted their IC while studying abroad. He administered a questionnaire to 1,163 students, and he found that those who had not previously lived in another culture or had lower initial levels of IC gained more than those with previous experience or higher levels of IC; being female was a significant predictor of IC development as women were more likely than men to make study-abroad program choices that were shown to be associated with increased gains in IC. Similarly, Shaftel et al. (2011) conducted a research on overseas experience and IC from 660 students, and the results in their research showed that students studying abroad improved significantly their basic characteristics such as open-mindedness,

flexibility, cross-cultural adaptability and appreciation of diversity, and they increased their understanding of the need for the study of foreign language and culture.

From this brief literature review, it is seen that several attempts have been made in order to deal with the diverse phenomena of IC; however, there is not much research reported on students' perceptions of IcLL and their IC. Therefore, this study endeavors to investigate EFL graduate students' perceptions of IcLL and their IC in an attempt to contribute its part to the body of literature of intercultural language teaching and learning.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Participants in this study who were conveniently sampled were seventy EFL graduate students (male: 52.9%; female: 47.1 %) studying at a university in Thailand. They were from different countries, namely Bangladesh (1.4%), Cambodia (8.6%), China (31.4%), Indonesia (2.9%), Laos (2.9%), Philippines (2.9%), Thailand (28.6%), and Vietnam (21.4%). Among them, the number of non-English majors was thirty-nine (55.7%), and that of English majors was thirty-one (44.3%). Their self-reported English proficiency was intermediate (51.4%) and advanced (48.6%). Moreover, they self-reported that many of them (72.9%) have never taken any (inter)cultural course, but all of them (100%) have ever been abroad to at least one country.

3.2 Instrument

This study employed a questionnaire to collect data. The questionnaire was designed based on the objectives of culture teaching given by Byram (1997). The questionnaire is composed of two parts: part A includes personal information; part B is about the questionnaire content consisting of fifty-two five-point Likert like scale items (from very untrue about me to very true about me) about perceptions of IcLL and elements of IC (attitudes, knowledge, skills, & awareness). The total reliability, calculated by Cronbach, was .86.

3.3. Data collection and data analysis

As for the data collection, the questionnaire was administered to eighty-five EFL graduate students in person; however, seventy questionnaires were returned to the researcher. Regarding data analysis, the collected data were analyzed by the SPSS version 15.0 program aiming to answer the research questions quantitatively. Descriptive statistics were involved in calculating mean scores and standard deviations for gender, major, English language proficiency, and IC. In addition, inferential statistics including independent samples T-test and correlation analysis were used. The independent samples T-test was employed to analyze the differences in students' perceptions of IcLL and their IC in terms of gender, major, English language proficiency; correlation analysis was utilized to determine the correlation between students' perceptions of IcLL and their IC.

4. Results

4.1 EFL Graduate students' perceptions of IcLL

As displayed in Table 2, the overall mean score of graduate students' perceptions of IcLL is 4.14 (out of 5), i.e., graduate students perceived that it was very important, interesting, and useful to learn about foreign cultures in English language classes. Graduate students appeared to have highly positive perceptions of IcLL.

Table 2 EFL Graduate students' perceptions of IcLL

Perceptions of IcLL	n=70	
	M	SD
6 items	4.14	.61

With respect to the differences in graduate students' perceptions of IcLL in terms of gender, major, and English proficiency, it is observed in Table 3 that there was no statistically significant difference in perceptions of IcLL between female and male students ($t=-1.199$, $p=.235$), and between English majors and non-English majors ($t=1.682$, $p=.097$). This means that graduate students had similar perceptions of IcLL regardless of gender and major. However, it is remarkably noticed that there was a statistically significant difference in students' perceptions of IcLL regarding English proficiency. In other words, students who had advanced level of English proficiency were found to have higher positive perceptions of IcLL ($M=4.30$) than those who had intermediate level of English proficiency ($M=3.99$).

Table 3 Differences in graduate students' perceptions of IcLL in terms of gender, major, and English proficiency

	Sig.	t	M(SD)	
			Gender	
			F	M
Perceptions of IcLL	.235	-1.199	4.23(.49)	4.06(.69)
			Major	
			English	Non-English
Perceptions of IcLL	.097	1.682	4.24(.59)	4.01(.62)
			English proficiency	
			Intermediate	Advanced
Perceptions of IcLL	.027*	-2.253	3.99(.58)	4.30(.60)

* $p<.05$

4.2 EFL graduate students' level of IC

The results from Table 4 reveal that the overall mean score was 3.82 (out of 5), which means that students' level of IC was generally high. Specifically, among four elements of IC, students' intercultural attitudes ($M=4.09$) and intercultural awareness ($M=4.02$) were found to be the higher than their intercultural knowledge ($M=3.53$) and intercultural skills ($M=3.62$). It can be interpreted that students were very curious, open, and ready to learn about other

cultures, and they were highly aware of cultural differences. Moreover, they were quite knowledgeable of their own culture and other cultures, and they were quite able to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices, and apply the knowledge and attitudes to interpret documents/events in the target culture.

Table 4 EFL Graduate students' IC

Elements	n=70	
	M	SD
Attitudes	4.09	.60
Knowledge	3.53	.65
Skills	3.65	.67
Awareness	4.02	.61
Total	3.82	.50

As seen from Table 5 which is about the differences in graduate students' IC in terms of gender, major, and English proficiency, no significant difference in students' IC was found between females and males ($t=.522$, $p=.603$), i.e., both female and male students had roughly the same level of IC ($M=3.79$ for females; $M=3.85$ for males). Nonetheless, the results show that there were significant differences in students' IC with respect to their major ($t=2.204$, $p=.031$) and level of English proficiency ($t=-3.441$, $p=.001$). This can be understood that students majoring in English had higher level of IC ($M=3.94$) than those majoring in other than English, and students who were advanced in English proficiency ($M=4.02$) were found to have much higher level of IC than those who were intermediate in English proficiency ($M=3.64$).

Table 5 Differences in graduate students' IC in terms of gender, major, and English proficiency

IC	Sig.	t	M(SD)	
			F	M
			Gender	
			Major	

			English	Non-English
IC	.031*	2.204	3.94(.45)	3.68(.53)
			English proficiency	
			Intermediate	Advanced
IC	.001**	-3.441	3.64(.50)	4.02(.43)

* p<.05
** p<.01

4.3 Relationship between EFL graduate students' perceptions of IcLL and their level of IC

Regarding the relationship between graduate students' perceptions of IcLL and their level of IC, it is observed from Table 6 that students' perceptions of IcLL was positively correlated with their level of IC ($r=.497, p=.000$), i.e., the more positive students' perceptions of IcLL were, the higher their level of IC was.

Table 6 Relationship between graduate students' perceptions of IcLL and their IC

		Correlation statistics	Perceptions of IcLL
IC		Pearson Correlation	.497**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
		n	70

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

More specifically, as noticed from Table 7, among four intercultural elements, students' perceptions of IcLL were found to be positively correlated with intercultural attitudes ($r=.496, p=.000$), intercultural knowledge ($r=.348, p=.003$), and intercultural skills ($r=.516, p=.000$), but there was no correlation between students' perceptions of IcLL and their intercultural awareness ($r=.205, p=.089$). This can be understood that the higher students' perceptions of IcLL were, the more positive impacts they had on their intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Yet, no matter how students' perceptions of IcLL were, they did not have any effect on their intercultural awareness.

Table 7 Correlation between graduate students' perceptions of IcLL and intercultural elements

	Correlation statistics	Perceptions of IcLL
Attitudes	Pearson Correlation	.496**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	n	70
Knowledge	Pearson Correlation	.348**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003
	n	70
Skills	Pearson Correlation	.516**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	n	70
Awareness	Pearson Correlation	.205
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.089
	n	70

** Correlation is significant at the .01level (2-tailed)

5. Discussion

This study was seen to generate some significant points. It was first noticed that graduate students thought positively about IcLL and believed that the learning about foreign cultures in English language classes was as important as the learning of the target language. In addition, the better graduate students could use English, the more positive their perceptions of IcLL were regardless of their gender and major. This finding could be attributed by the facts that they all were experienced in traveling abroad to at least one country, and they were studying in a multicultural context in which students were from different countries. It may be implied that having much experience in interacting with people from different cultures could favor students changing their perceptions of IcLL positively, so their IC could be improved accordingly. This finding is in alignment with that in previous studies (e.g., Brighton, 2010; Nakano et al., 2011; Shaftel et al., 2011) which prove that students who engage in greater communication with people from different cultures can have better IC.

Second, graduate students were found to have high level of IC, and graduate students who had high level of English proficiency were those who had higher level of IC. In other words, this finding indicated that students who were English majors and could use English proficiently were able to interact more effectively and appropriately than those who were non-English majors and were not highly proficient in English. One of the possible explanation for this may be the time of learning English. i.e. the more students learned English, the higher level of IC they had. However, both male and female students were not different in their level of IC. This may be explained that they both were likely to have to spend similar hours on coursework and have similar opportunities to interact with people from different cultures. This finding is controversially incompatible with that in the study done by Nichols (2011) who concludes that the level of IC of female students is different from that of their male counterparts, and male students are less intercultural competent than female students.

Last but not least, on the question of relationship between graduate students' perceptions of IcLL and their level of IC, this study revealed that there was a positive correlation between them. This finding may imply that students' perceptions of IcLL could conceptualize their acquisition of IC, and could be a strong predictor of their level of IC. Nevertheless, as far as intercultural elements are concerned, graduate students' perceptions of IcLL were surprisingly discovered to be positively correlated with their intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills, but not to be correlated with their intercultural awareness. This may be interpreted that how graduate students perceived the IcLL would affect extensively on their intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills but not on their intercultural awareness though intercultural awareness is enhanced and supported by intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills. It seems difficult to explain this result, but it might be inferred that intercultural

awareness, which helps to develop other elements of IC and simultaneously benefits from their development (e.g., Byram, 1997; Fantani, 2000), is not directly affected from perceptions.

6. Conclusion

From the findings obtained from this study, it may be implicated that students' perceptions of IcLL play an important role in helping to develop their IC inasmuch as student's perceptions can be a strong impact factor on their acquisition process of IC. Furthermore, having much experience in communicating with people from different cultures may also adjust students' perceptions of IcLL and accumulate their IC. It is hence imperative that language educators should pay much attention to their students' perceptions when trying to integrate intercultural learning into foreign language education in an attempt to help students to develop their IC and ICC. In addition, students should be prepared with specific intercultural courses when they are in multicultural contexts, e.g., for international students who are about to travel to Australia for their studies, specific cultural courses of Australian culture and relevant cultures should be given to them so that they will have a general look on endemic and pandemic cultures. In another aspect, administrators and language educators in multicultural institutions should take the raising of IC awareness into great account in their educational programs to organize a variety of multicultural activities so that both international students and local students could avoid communication breakdown, cultural shock and conflicts.

However, this study still had many limitations as this study was conducted with a small sample size and a pure quantitative research design. Therefore, it is suggested that

further research should be carried out with a larger sample size and a mixed method research design in order to generalize the findings and triangulate the finding, respectively.

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